The New York Times Fax

Page 1 of 6

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Fax Phone 1-732-417-9076

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BY: DDD ;01/06,18:28 OP: DDD ;01/06,18:28 FR: ** 18:29 DDDPR: QU
NOTE: STYLE NOIR PRINTED: 14:59 07-JAN-98

Your Search Request: **STYLE NOIR AND DATE IS 9/14/97**

1ST STORY of Level 1 printed in FULL format.

The New York Times
September 14, 1997, Sunday, Late Edition - Final
SECTION: Section 1; Page 47; Column 5; Style Desk
LENGTH: 1598 words

HEADLINE: STYLE NOIR

BYLINE: By WILLIAM L. HAMILTON

BODY:

TROUBLE is big business this fall. If urban crime is down, urbane fear is on a roll - in fashion, movies, books and home design. Hollywood and Seventh Avenue have introduced a sinister new lining to the American dream, and they are escorting it to the bank like a dry-eyed widow with a fat will in her purse.

The products have the hard-edge look that lurks better than ever: noir, pure and blood simple, with its cinematic sense of style, a world of black and white, light and shadow, where only crime is colorful and kisses kill. For people who think it's a hard reboil of the 1950's, noir and its unseen terrors have never been more timely.

''People are afraid of random chaos,'' said James Ellroy, the author of ''My Dark Places,'' a memoir of his mother's murder in 1958. ''Car-jackings, serial killers, the proliferation of guns - they're afraid of all the stuff they see on the evening news.''

He added: ''People like darkness, and they like touching it. Noir is a way of experiencing it and gaining thrill from it and remaining safe from it at the same time.''

The first of a wave of noir-influenced movies, ''L.A. Confidential,'' based on an Ellroy novel and set in 1950's Los Angeles, is to open on Friday with an all-star cast of corrupt cops and Kim Basinger as a Veronica Lake look-alike. Hard on its heels in October is Oliver Stone's ''U-Turn,'' starring Sean Penn as a con man trapped in a small desert town.

Noir's cool voiceover is narrating new tough talk for fashion, too, after the failure of the waif look. Innocence was just too hard to pull off in the 1990's.

Tom Ford's fall collection for Gucci features a 40's monkey-fur jacket the

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color
of a Malibu-motel crime-scene swimming pool, a black leather suit in which to answer the postman's second ring and five-inch Saturday night special metal stilettos that look more like handguns than shoes. Fendi and Ralph Lauren are also doing silver metal heels.

Voyeurism, noir's signature viewpoint, informs the ads. Gucci's images have been shot from video monitors to give them the distrusting look of surveillance.

Cerruti's new ads are grainy caught-in-car-headlights photos of a couple on the
run - from what and from whom?

''What looks good to our eye right now is harder and more violent,'' Mr. Ford
said. ''Our lives are more violent. The last thing you want to look like is vulnerable. Grace Kelly's 50's wouldn't work today.''

Home design has made the ransom-note pickup with ''Dial M for Murder'' black
Bakelite-style telephones in the Pottery Barn catalogue and black metal oscillating fans to blow your nails dry before you dial.

Music is also in a dark mood. The pop stylist Carly Simon plays femme fatale
on ''Film Noir,'' an album to be released on Tuesday. It includes songs from films
like Otto Preminger's ''Laura'' and sensual standards like ''Don't Smoke in Bed.'' A
documentary on making the album, ''Songs in Shadow,'' is to benefit American Movie
Classics for the preservation of noir films.

All this is just in time for noir's literary canonization. Eleven classic American noir novels from the 40's and 50's, including Jim Thompson's ''The Killer Inside Me'' and Cornell Woolrich's ''I Married a Dead Man,'' will stand beside Poe and Faulkner in October in the Library of America series.

Why noir now? Like the boom of the post-World War II 1940's and 50's, the future seems bright. The economy is good, the land is happy.

But seeing is not believing. Nothing understood this better than the style

of noir.

''Optimism can be both created and exploited,'' said Curtis Hanson, who directed ''L.A. Confidential,'' which is set in what Mr. Hanson called ''the forward-looking 50's'' of his childhood in Los Angeles. Mr. Hanson used songs like Johnny Mercer's ''Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive'' and vocalists like Dean Martin and Chet Baker - popular today as lounge-culture music - to convey a postwar America trying to laugh at the threat of nuclear holocaust.

''It's all about looking on the bright side,'' Mr. Hanson said. ''When you can't
ignore the negative, you repress it. What speaks to our country more today than
repression?''

As the production designer for ''L.A. Confidential,'' Jeannine Oppewall dealt with the deceptively sunny surface of Los Angeles directly. ''There's no sun without night,'' she said. Ms. Oppewall recalls her first few months in Hollywood in the 1970's, when the police knocked on her door one morning.

''Madam, haven't you noticed the dead body in the car parked at the end of your driveway?'' they asked.

''Somebody had been murdered and abandoned in a car in front of my house,'' she said.

'' 'L.A. Confidential' was a story that on the surface looked pretty nice and normal but, once you got into the bowels of it, was kind of decadent and decaying,'' she said.

N OIR'S dark observations of an unseen world larger than the moral universe look uncannily prescient. Only the most gifted cynics, like the creators of the original noir story style, could have written today's headlines of child beauty queen stranglings and spree killers. Street crime may be down statistically in major cities, but the perception of crime - and of its perversity - is heightened. Skepticism about the police and the Government breed anxiety despite what should be reassuring official statistics.

''Certainly, we live in an age of cynicism in which people are deeply suspicious about what the Government tells them,'' said Andrew Karmen, a professor of criminology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York.

The absence of belief in leadership, he suggests, has created its own kind of modern anxieties. As the future brightens statistically in the news, the shadows deepen in the public consciousness.

''There's a fear that the whole thing - the good news of the stock market, the low crime rate - is a bubble,'' said Charles Bahn, a psychologist at John Jay.

The alternative is to take comfort in imagining the worst.

''Noir confirms our anxieties that the inverse may be brewing beneath the surface,'' Dr. Bahn said, citing corporate downsizing as an example of cultural paranoia. It is also the topic of ''The Axe,'' a 90's noir novel by Donald Westlake. The killer is middle management.

''The economy is good in The Wall Street Journal,'' Dr. Bahn said. ''How do you square that with being told your job no longer exists? We've added darker motives to daily life. Violence and betrayal in conventional, ordinary relationships - that's what noir has to offer, the hidden motives of people we deal with on a day-to-day basis.''

Noir's stylish cynicism has never looked better as a sales tool.

''What you're looking for,'' reads the copy at the bottom of a Camel cigarette ad, which features a dark-lidded, 1990's femme fatale behind a martini glass in a shadowy lounge. The copy at the top of the picture is the Surgeon General's warning, in letters as large as the sales pitch. What you may be looking for is a good excuse to smoke. And noir has it - a kind of armed and glamorous, name-your-poison approach.

''Camel is embracing night life and sophistication and an urban feeling,'' said Richard Williams, a spokesman for the R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company. ''We think urban night life and sophistication are more of an attitude than a geographic location.''

It is. It is noir's classic landscape - the city of night. Where the enemy within lives, not the girl next door.

I THINK AIDS has changed our perceptions of beauty,'' Mr. Ford of Gucci said.

''In the late 70's, who were the most beautiful girls? Patty Hanson, Cheryl Tiegs. They looked like they wanted to be kissed. They were touchable.''

But the casual act has become frightening; fashion is dressing the fear. ''Now, people still want to look sexy, but there's a danger to it,'' he said. ''The look is, 'Yes, kiss me, but I might kill you, too.' ''

If modern life appears to imitate noir's art, the low life of noir has established itself as a respectable genre of 20th-century American art. The lonely, moral vacancy in paintings by Edward Hopper, the absolved grotesques of Diane Arbus's photographs, the lurid triumph of television as a cultural denominator, all touch a noir nerve.

''It's become clear that the noir tradition, whether in novels or movies, really is the dominant style of the American 20th century,'' said Geoffrey O'Brien, executive editor of the Library of America. ''It pulls together all the big themes of the power of money and corruption and sexual obsession - and a kind of craziness. It has seeped so much into the culture that it's like a vocabulary for people to use.''

As pulp literature for the computer age, the next great body of noir is being written on the Internet - by amateurs. Faceless, amoral, unknowable, the Internet is basically a noir experience, a descending trip to an underworld of tipoffs and titillations, a blind date with paranoia, a mirror world like the final scene in ''The Lady From Shanghai,'' Orson Welles's noir classic: in a mirrored funhouse, what the killer finally stalks is himself.

''Noir isn't crime so much as it's existential dilemma,'' said Luc Sante,

author of ''Evidence,'' a book of archival police photographs published in 1992.
''It's about isolation and wide-ranging but unspecific fear - a kind of fear of
being.''

Mr. Sante, at one time a fixture on the New York downtown club circuit, now spends half his year upstate.

''One of the reasons I'm not in the city is that the mood is cutthroat,'' Mr.
Sante said. ''There's not a lot of peace and love in the air. Crime may be down,
but the mood of benevolent fellow feeling is down even further.''

GRAPHIC: Photos: IN THE SHADOWS - Clockwise from top left, a Gucci surveillance-camera ad; Kim Basinger in ''L.A. Confidential''; Pottery Barn's name-your-poison martini glass; Gucci silver stilettos; new Camel ad; monkey fur
and leather from Gucci; Library of America salute; Pottery Barn's ''Dial M for Murder'' phone and ''Naked City'' fan; a femme fatale lurks.

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

LOAD-DATE: September 14, 1997

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